

# ***What would an informant tell me after reading my paper? On theoretical significance of ethical commitment and political transparency***

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## **Introduction**

There is a paradox in the social scientific research. It seems that when moral values enter the analytical process, the theoretical quality of its outcome, treated mostly through the concept of objectivity, seems to be threatened. On the other hand without subscribing to a particular ethical values or political stands we are unable to formulate our research problems. The trouble looks like this at least from the perspective of Max Weber. Weber's solution of the above mentioned paradox lied in the sharp distinction between inevitable moral and political engagement as a necessary condition of starting whatever research and methodological objectivity which meant for him the value free and technically controlled process of especially concept construction. Such is the framework in which he developed the notion of *ideal types* and demonstrated how using ideal type as a technical analytical tool warrants objectivity and how improper handling of ideal types changes them into theoretically useless tools of moral evaluation.

This distinction between stating the research objective where ethics and politics is engaged inevitably and the procedure which should be void of moral values is accepted by a mainstream social scientists as a standard and sufficient solution of the problem. We have, however, learned from the postcolonial authors that the moral and political engagement on the level of research objective combined with the objective methodological procedures is a powerful tool for domination over studied peoples, of their marginalization or legitimation of the practice of neglecting their needs and interests. Timothy Fitzgerald for example demonstrates, how „Religious Studies departments and journals are, or are similar to, ritual institutions that reproduce a dominant concept

of social order, in this case liberal capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Postcolonial theorists thus challenge our claims to objectivity by showing in various ways how it too often serves as a curtain for dominance and exploitation. But it means that methodological procedure itself cannot be apparently impartial in situation when it is not able to neutralize the partiality of the research objectives. This, however, casts doubts upon any claims for objectivity of the theory which itself become suspect of being nothing more than instruments legitimating cruelty and immoral treatment of the wretched.

This might suggest that the weberian framework does not provide tools sensitive enough to enable us tackle well the complex problems related to ethics, politics, objectivity and the quality of theory in social research. In the following story of troubles with asymmetry I faced in my analysis of instructed action, I would like to demonstrate practically some relations between ethics, politics, and theory and to show how bringing clear political and ethical decisions into a research process can enhance the quality of theory, including its objectivity.

## **A story of a tiny explosion**

The story I want to narrate relates to my research of contemporary dancers during their work on a performance based on improvisation. In order to be able to build up an improvisation on a particular theme the dancers experimented with different rules defining particular situations, which would finally form the basic structure of the improvisation. So the experimenting during the dance trainings was mainly about exploring what will happen in interaction of the dancers if their possibilities of action are limited through a particular instruction defining a particular task. The ultimate goal of the project was to explore and represent on the stage what is going on in a situation when the people have a relatively common tasks to carry on, but no a priori roles assigned to them. So the performance ought to be mostly about negotiation and establishing relations in a group which is forced to cooperate on a common task.

The particular problem I was dealing with in the particular part of my analysis of instructed action, which I want to speak of today, concerned the difficulties in achieving a shared understanding of an instruction. This analysis has shown what uncontrolled and unpredictable forces enter the way the instruction is interpreted and carried on, and the way how all the participants, and especially the instructing choreographer, is forced to improvise in almost every second of the activity despite the fact that she spent many hours by planning the instruction so that it should make the dancers enter particular situation. For example a situation of being forced to deal with a dancer interfering by his

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1 Timothy Fitzgerald, „Playing Language Games and Performing Rituals: Religious Studies as Ideological State Apparatus“, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, 2003, 209-254: 212.

own activity accidentally to the activity of the other thus producing an urge to negotiate.

The particular situation I speak of took place during one instance of an activity called „tree“. The dancer called Lenka, as *I have learned*, diverted relatively consistently from the most of other dancers, and especially the choreographer's idea, in following certain kinds of choreographer's instructions. So she forced Šárka, the choreographer, more often than the others, to elaborate her instructions in the course of an ongoing activity. But in a particular case I am speaking of the task failed – from the point of view of the choreographer – completely and not because of Lenka. The expected mutual interference of the dancers in their respective activities did not take place at all.

From the subsequent discussions it became clear that the problem lied in understanding of particular concepts in instruction and thus in divergent definitions of situation/activity by each participant.

To make things clearer let me describe the task, which was twofold: first the dancers were instructed to imagine a tree stably rooted on the rock and to explore and represent its shape and movement by an improvised dance. Lenka's expression of the tree was particularly dissatisfying to Šárka, who formulated her dissatisfaction in terms of not believing Lenka to feel it like that, and suspecting her of reproducing just an „empty form“. Second, the dancers ought to set themselves *under* the tree and, after getting ready, to move into the space, locate *the thing* they gravely need catch it, and return to the protected spot under the tree again. During locating the „thing they need“ the dancers were expected, by the choreographer, to get into interactions. Yet they did not.

Later discussions in a coffee-house revealed that some of the dancers got perplexed by Šárka's expression „getting into contact“. During the most of previous trainings „getting into contact“ meant very general demand for getting into whatever kind of contact. Yet due to some troubles of the dancers trained more in classical and modern dance forms than in the contemporary partnering and contact improvisation, Šárka pursued more activities elaborating the skills of getting into contact in a technical sense of sharing weight as it is understood in a contact improvisation inspired greatly by the martial art of aikido and its principles of using energy of the body.

The problem with Lenka's tree seemed at first to me to be similar. The particular trouble lied in the fact that she was reading the tree instruction through her experience with the tree activity as it was carried on seven and half months back, at a weekend program during which the choreographers experimented with some interested dancers and the style of work they planned to apply in the project. But during this weekend workshop the activity was not guided by either of the two choreographers, but by Alena, a person, who participated in the project as a (visual) artist responsible for a scene design. And this workshop took place some five months before the intensive

work on the project with a selected group of participating dancers started.

So the trouble seemed to have something to do with achieving consensus on the meaning of instruction due to differing presumptions of various participants concerning the definition of a situation, and resulting from divergent ways of integrating shared experience in their individual biographies.

Yet there was something what dissatisfied me when I was rereading my account of the situation in a conference paper. Lenka was definitely an important actor causing interesting things to happen. Seeing that I have found it useful to create a code „Lenka“ by an automated coding function in order to get deeper in my analysis. But I felt that that something goes wrong if Lenka also looks as a trouble maker doing things wrong in my account. So I started to ask myself what she might tell me after reading this same text. And I had good reason to do so. Once ~~I made her angry by asking her some questions I needed to confront her with in order to test some of my provisional interpretations of what is going on in the field.~~ I have innocently told her that it seems to me that she suffered much during the project and that I think she had found very respectable way to withdraw from it as a dancer, and I asked her what she thinks of this interpretation. She commented my question saying that she is not ready to read something about her suffering in my articles, and refused to speak more about this issue. This moment was very important because since the beginning of my research I made very clear to all the participants that they can refuse their participation in the research project in any period of my work on it. Practically it would demand from me to fulfil the promise that I delete all the passages they are mentioned in in my field notes. So „what she might tell me“ turned to be much quite a pressing question to me as a researcher interested in having as rich data as possible. So this ethical commitment to the participants urged me to consider more carefully the issues of symmetry in the field relationships.

So sitting by my computer and editing the text I had to ask seriously what she might tell me if she was sitting there with me. And I have realized that in course of my analysis of the situation mentioned above I have twice deleted from the particular network view in Atlas.ti application for the qualitative data analysis two important quotes from my field notes. These quotes were dealing with a discussion between Šárka and Lenka concerning the aesthetic quality of dance. While Šárka maintained a theory emphasising the ability of the dancers to express their feelings and emotions through their movement, Lenka emphasised the spacial and figurative aspect of the movement, and so its visual quality in a sense of a movement and positioning in the space. In this context I have also found quotes, in which Alena, the (visual) artist responsible for a scene design who guided the tree activity during a weekend workshop expressed the same aesthetic theory of dance as Lenka and

made clear to me that this theory drives what she is doing in dance and land art – seeing it in her imagination as a painting. The crucial aspect of the discussion between Lenka and Šárka then was that they have not reached any kind of consensus on their aesthetic theory. The problem was closed by agreeing on mutual right to divergent opinion.

This discovery, however, led to another discoveries, especially to the recognition of the importance of power relations between the dancers and the choreographers, and of the dependency of these relations on a particular setting. While the world famous choreographer like Akram Khan can choose from virtually unlimited international pool of dancers those who fit well to his idea of the planned opening ceremony at the Olympics in London, Šárka, working in the context of a local half-professional dance project with significantly smaller pool of possible participants, expressed numerous times the necessity to work with the people she had at her disposal. But while expressing this, she also repeatedly expressed her preference for the process of the work in favour of its result.

This way ethically motivated symmetrical treatment of the participants in the research helped me to realize the importance of the power relations for the course of instructed action. Lenka, as my notes justify, could not carry on some activities the way which contradicted her aesthetic theory. Not because she would be so dogmatic over this theory, but because this theory was inscribed in her body, her senses and feelings. In this sense, making the analysis more symmetrical, helped to make its outcome more complex and theoretically solid. The question then is why I was not able to see these power relations since the beginning.

An the answer is relatively simple. I spent much more time with choreographers then with the dancers, because I was present during all their discussions concerning elaboration of the ongoing project and planning of training situations. This way I was effectively socialized into their perspective on what is going on during the trainings. So effectively, that my field notes express a kind of joy related to my ability *to see* which dancers do things wrong. The ability which seemed to be empirically *verified* by the choreographers comments to the situations I was diligently noting down while observing the dancers in training. This way these power relations where taken by me for granted. I have subscribed to the notion that choreographers are right, while the dancers may be right or wrong. It became a matter of *fact* to me. I needed Lenka to „strike me back“<sup>2</sup> in her reaction to my comment on her suffering, to come to see my blindness. This „striking back“ thus proved to work as an ethically enabled interaction between the participant and the researcher working as the tool of empirical falsification of a theory.

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2 For the meaning of „striking back“ see Bruno Latour, „When Things Strike Back“, *British Journal of Sociology* 51(2000)/1 : 107-123.

## Things striking back

This notion of „striking back“ brings us thus to Bruno Latour, and as I will try to show, enables us to find more sensitive tools to grasp the relation between ethics, politics, and theory in the research process. While speaking of „striking back“ Latour returns to his experience with natural scientists objecting to his accounts of the *social construction* of scientific facts. This situation became decisive to him and led him to elaborate anew the notion of a *social construction*. But more important to me, now and here, is this:

*„After two centuries of easily explaining away the behavior and beliefs of farmers, the poor, fetishists, fanatics, priests, lawyers, and businessmen whose anger was rarely registered [...], we were going to finally see whether or not the social could explain anything else. Chemists, rocket scientists, and physicists are used to seeing their laboratories explode, but it had been quite a while before the sociologist's office could run an experiment risky enough even to have a chance to fail! And, this time, it did explode. After a week in Roger Guillemin's laboratory thirty years ago, I remember how inescapable I found the conclusion: the social cannot be substituted for the tiniest polypeptide, the smallest rock, the most innocuous electron, the tamest baboon. Objects of science may explain the social, not the other way around. No experience was more striking than what I saw with my own eyes: the social explanation had vanished into thin air.“<sup>3</sup>*

The fail of social explanation, Latour speaks of, led him to a reformulation of the notion of *explanation* itself. But I would like to turn your attention to his remodelling of the concept of *objectivity*. The concept, which in order to warrant better theoretical results of the research, incorporates radical ethical and political premisses.

While the traditional notion of objectivity constructs the value-free realm of scientific research by demanding impartiality based on unrealistic ability of a scientist to assume the God's view, the notion elaborated by Latour presumes particular positioning and engagement of the scientist among those with whom he „connects through some research protocol“<sup>4</sup>. Such notion of objectivity does not lie on godly impartiality but on relatively simple principle of letting the studied objects *to object* to what the scientists says about them.<sup>5</sup> While the natural scientist do not need to care much about the ability of their object to what they say of them, since these objects are so careless of their claims that they refuse to repeat what they have done before, they get lost from the site, they resist being

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3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 98-99.

4 Bruno Latour, „On recalling ANT“, in: John Law, John Hasard (eds.), *Actor Network Theory and after*, Oxford – Malden: Blackwell Publishing and The Sociological Review 1999, 15-24, 20.

5 Bruno Latour, „When Things Strike Back“, 114-115.

experimented, they die or explode during an experiment, the people studied by the social scientists are much more careful and polite.<sup>6</sup> They do not do so carelessly the same things as the objects of natural scientists. Furthermore, if they do, their voice is just suppressed as an irrational claim against scientific Truth. It means that the social scientist is in a much more difficult situation while preparing such conditions that his laboratory might explode. And it did explode the very first time „social scientists had to study something that was higher, harder, and stronger than them. [...] When the truths to be explained [...] [were] equally valued by those who study and by those who are studied as the only treasure on earth worth fighting for[.]“<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

So let me in the end come back to my story. This was a story of just a very small explosion. This explosion took place in a tiny situation, so tiny that each and every journal article is based on a great number of such tiny situations. When everything goes right, nothing explodes, then such article is filled with harm to the people who had entered the account. And all this violence passes unnoticed. And a bad theory comes as a result.

I was trying to show 1) how difficult it is to prepare proper conditions for even a very tiny explosion, and 2) that such conditions come as a result ethical and political decisions. Ethical decision to refuse to use our potential power over the participants given to us by the authority of the expert system we are representing. The political decision of refusing to take any privilege or dominance for granted.<sup>8</sup> It is a decision to subscribe to and support any established order, so its far from being conservative in its character. And these ethical and political decision can do more for developing a good and objective theory than the iron cage of any methodological canon or the naive objectivist notion of *objectivity*, which first of all prevents us effectively from experiencing any kind of explosions.

Let me in this context articulate the words of my friend and colleague Tomáš Kobes. During a lecture on participative observation addressed to our students he emphasised that ethnography as a method is the tool for doing real hard science. Because it is ethnography in which the researcher is constantly touch with those he studies, he constantly enacts his provisional theories of what they are doing in his interaction with them, and so he is constantly forced by them to change his mind, instantly corrected by his informers interacting completely different way then he expected,

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6 Ibid., 115-116.

7 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 99.

8 See John Law, *Organizing Modernity*. Oxford - Cambridge: Blackwell 1994, 12.

responding by different words than he has awaited. This is extremely important. Yet, let me qualify this statement a bit. Its true, but its not complete. Being in the field and making notes is only a part of the researchers work. And to be sure, it is not in the field where researcher has much power on his side. It happens that he is rather dominated and used by the members<sup>9</sup>. But his power is in his routine of making notes. These he can control. For sure, people are curious in what is he noting down, they eventually even watch from behind his back and make comments. Yet it is not too often and it does not happen systematically. The notes are a researcher's treasure. And as Andrea Beláňová also demonstrated, they may be used as a tool helping the researcher to deal with situations in which he is dominated by the members and feels helpless facing their demands.<sup>10</sup> So the notes help him to handle the asymmetries in favour of those he studies.

Yet the notes are just a first step in collecting data and making analysis. The real works starts when he comes back home, transcribes the notes in his computer, feeds the project in an application for the qualitative analysis with them, and starts to read them again, comment them, coding them, comparing them, writing memos, drawing relations between parts of them and so on. It is at this point he comes to play „power play“ as Zdeněk Konopásek once expressed it.<sup>11</sup> At this point he turns to the rich resources of technology, of knowledge elaborated by generations of his colleagues and materialized in texts in numerous databases and libraries. It is at this point when the ability of letting „things strike back“ may vanish in air. So it is at this point when the political and ethical decisions enhancing the quality of his theory need to be loaded in. In short, it is in the process of analysis when the politics and ethics turns tu be really important. At the point in which, as it seems, the face to face interaction with the studied people seems to be ending and so the political and ethical commitments seem to stop being relevant.

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9 Markéta Vaňková, „Výzkumník lapený: Úvahy k (a)symetrii vztahů mezi výzkumníkem a zkoumaným“, *Biograf* 52-53, 2010: 103-118. See also Andrea Beláňová, „S kým povedu dialog? Vyjednávání o rolích v terénním výzkumu“, *Biograf* 57, 2012: forthcoming (quoted from a manuscript of the paper).

10 Andrea Beláňová, „S kým povedu dialog? ...“.

11 Zdeněk Konopásek, "Sociologie jako power play", *Sociológia* 28(1996)/2: 99-125.